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CIA/OCI/IM 0404-75 PROSPECTS FOR A COUP IN EL
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Prospects for a Coup in El Salvador

PRECIS

Recent reports indicate that a group of active and retired military officers, mostly colonels and lieutenant colonels, have approached a group of captains to see if they would support a coup to oust President Arturo Molina. Since the captains were cool to the idea, and since their support is considered essential by the colonels, there will probably be no action in this current round of plotting. It is quite possible, however, that the military will step in before 1977 rather than permit another fraudulent election.

MILITARY ATTITUDES AND CLUES FROM THE PAST

The military is the most powerful political force in El Salvador. It is the military officers who decide who will govern and what direction the government will take. While they are mildly reformist and consider themselves close to the people, they are essentially conservative and paternalistic in their perception of the problems of the masses. They consider it their responsibility to decide what the people need, and their decisions are frequently colored by their own needs.

During the past two decades, all Salvadoran governments have been headed by military officers and have remained in power because of military backing. Most coup plotting has been instigated by dissidents within the military establishment who were dissatisfied with their own career prospects or who wanted to better their positions. Plotters have at times paid lip service to the aspirations of the civilian sector, but have rarely brought civilians into their plans. Plotting has been frequent, but few actual coup attempts have been made.

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Those that have succeeded were undertaken for reasons that appealed strongly to the military and had the benefit of strong leadership.

El Salvador's most recent coup (1961) is a good example. In October 1960, a group of leftist officers and civilians overturned the government of Colonel Jose Maria Lemus. Only three months later, the leftist junta was ousted by the majority of the military establishment, united in its determination to rid the country of its "communist" government and led by the decisive Colonel Julio Rivera. The Rivera government subsequently gained widespread support through a program of economic and social reform, but the coup was possible and control was maintained because a majority of the military considered it necessary and Rivera proved to be a dynamic leader.

IS THE MILITARY SATISFIED WITH MOLINA?

Molina took office in 1972 as the result of an election that was widely believed to have been rigged. A coup attempt by disaffected army officers following the election failed because of poor planning, uncertain leadership, and lack of support among a majority of the officers. An investigation showed that most of the rebels were involved because of personal dissatisfaction. Molina began a series of discussions with groups of officers to determine the causes of their discontent. Since assuming office, he has taken a number of steps to solve some of their problems.

- He has upgraded military equipment by purchase of new planes and weapons.
- He has provided housing assistance for military families.
- He has forced some older officers to retire in order to make room for the younger ones to advance.
- He has given younger officers increased responsibility.
- He has taken a tough line with leftist students and politicians.

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Even though recent plotting proves that it is impossible to keep all the officers happy, the dissidents' lack of success in enlisting the support of the captains' group--called the "Group of 44"--indicates that Molina has performed reasonably well in their view. In addition to expressing their satisfaction with the assignments and help Molina has given them, many of these captains owe their commissions to Molina. They are all from the Military Academy class of 1966, and Molina--then subdirector of the academy--reportedly was instrumental in obtaining commissions for a number who did not qualify for graduation.

IS A COUP LIKELY?

The reform program started by Rivera has lost much of its momentum under his successors, Sanchez and Molina. World-wide inflation and other economic problems are being felt in El Salvador as elsewhere, and the adequacy of the administration to combat these problems is being questioned by both civilian and military observers. The democratization of the electoral process which El Salvador so proudly displayed during the 1960s has diminished with each election since 1970, as loss of support for the governing party has increasingly "necessitated" electoral fraud to get the desired results.

All of these factors matter to the military as parts of one major problem. The officers view the electoral process with ambivalence. They favor democracy as long as the right party wins. They have been proud of El Salvador's new democratic image, but they are not yet ready to accept a civilian--especially a Christian Democrat--as President or allow that party to win control of the legislature. As the Christian Democrats have gained in strength, becoming the major opposition party, they have also become a threat. Increasing use of electoral fraud by the government has made them less cooperative as an opposition and more willing to enter coalitions with parties farther to the left, including the Communists. This has merely "confirmed" the military's worst fears about them.

To the extent that the military blames the governing party for its loss of support, it is unhappy with the

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party's inaction on reform programs, economic development, and inability to combat inflation. Government handling of peasant unrest, leftist violence, and student demonstrations, on the other hand, is likely to cause military criticism only if it lacks firmness. The closing of the national university in 1972 for over a year, for instance, gained the government some credit with the military. Although the military is not likely to oust the Molina government soon, there is a strong possibility that it will do so before the presidential election in 1977 unless the administration shows evidence in the meantime of having recovered enough of its lost support to be able to maintain control without resorting to fraud.

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